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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of providing education for parenting and reviews programs designed to meet the needs of parent groups. The programs reviewed and issues raised will assist those involved in conducting parent sessions to more effectively address the needs of participants and select helpful materials. Parent education is defined as educating parents in their role as caregivers. Parent courses can be aimed at numerous areas such as: (1) the nutritional and dietary needs of children; (2) care of mother's health prior to conception and during pregnancy; and (3) knowledge of children's changing requirements according to their developmental level. Methods of evaluating programs are offered along with some of the implications for parent training. Contains 33 references. (BF)

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Parent Education: Issues for Counselors

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Running head: PARENT EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of providing education for parenting. It defines parent education, explores a rationale for provision of such services, evaluates the efficacy of currently available programs, and considers implications for those involved in the education process. A discussion of potential problems in program implementation and evaluation is included.

Parent Education: Issues for Counselors

Introduction

The impetus given to parent education programs appears to have come from a number of different ideas. Mental health professionals working with children (counselors and psychologists) acknowledge the central role that parents play in their child's development (Davies, 1978; Rob & Norfor, 1980). Parents, especially the mother, are the most significant influences over children during their formative years (Huber & Lynch, 1978). There appears to be evidence to suggest that ineffective parenting can be related to irregular child development (Clifford, 1987).

This ineffective parenting can influence children's poor performance at school, which is particularly significant for educators (Bell, 1975). Anecdotal comments from class teachers often confirm this finding. Parent training can be a powerful means of increasing a child's potential to attain a meaningful formal education.

An important realization allied to the role of parents is that behavioral change can be effected in the child's home environment (Huber & Lynch, 1978). It is not always necessary for problems in the home to be treated by professionals outside of the family. Effective support systems can help parents having problems coping with the demands of raising children.

Many parents experience difficulties in raising their children. They are concerned about their children's character development, as well as specific problems which arise. The difficulties are such that some parents believe they can not handle their children without assistance. Increasing numbers of children, adolescents and families are requiring special attention for behavioral and emotional problems. An Australia study estimates the

percentage of children suffering significant mental health problems is about 10 percent (Burdekin, 1993). These children and adolescents with mental health problems have serious issues which require intervention from professionals. Unfortunately the mental health professions has been a relative growth industry in recent times.

There has been a growing attempt by authorities to shift from the remedial model of intervention to a preventive one. This intervention prior to the development of serious problems and, more importantly, to encourage the development of positive adjustments in families is certainly a trend to be supported. Perhaps the key factor which will encourage authorities to increase the allocation of funds and resources to the preventive model, is the fact that significant savings can be made in the long term, as fewer people will require the more costly remedial intervention at a later stage. This continues to be an issue of much concern to mental health professionals.

Society is changing rapidly and is developing at a faster rate than was experienced in previous generations. Styles of parenting appropriate to the social order of previous generations are no longer appropriate today (Dinkmeyer, McKay & McKay, 1987; Drent, 1991). Traditionally, parenting skills have been passed on from one generation of parents to the next. This instructional method is no longer appropriate, not only because of the changing nature of each generation's world, but also because the changing structure of the nuclear family itself, makes it difficult for children to learn these skills from their parents. This a serious issue reflected in the divorce statistics. Research indicates that each year, more than one million American children experience the divorce of their parents (Yauman, 1991).

Parenting is a difficult task. It is a role that some parents can no longer

be expected to learn completely unassisted by professionals, who in the process, can learn much from parents. Gabel, Haig-Friedman, Friedman and Vietze (1976) list three determinants of the behavior of parents:

- their early experience as children,
- their own beliefs about children and the effects of specific child-rearing practices, and
- the range of child-rearing techniques familiar to them.

The last determinant appears to be one that would be particularly susceptible to influence through educational intervention such as a parent education programs.

This article addresses education for parenting and reviews programs designed to meet the needs of parent groups. The programs reviewed and issues raised will assist those involved in conducting parent sessions to more effectively address the needs of participants, and select helpful materials.

Parent education defined

Parent education can be thought of as encompassing all attempts at educating parents in their role as caregivers (Fine, 1980). Parent courses can be aimed at one, a combination of, or all of the following areas:

- the nutritional and dietary needs of children,
- care of mother's health prior to conception and during pregnancy,
- knowledge of children's changing requirements according to their developmental level,
- knowledge of the causation of children's behavior,
- knowledge of the principles of language and cognitive development,
- the development of parenting skills,

- the skills to apply such learnings in the home situation.

(Barletta, 1993; Bell, 1975; Davies, 1978; Drent, 1991; Gordon. 1970; McFadden, 1988; Petersen, 1992; Sears, 1982; Stevens, 1978; Toms & Levett, 1985; Washington, 1977)

Parent training can be provided on an individual basis or in a group setting. The motivation to do so for a particular parent or group of parents may be proactive (Dinkmeyer, & McKay, 1977) or reactive (Johnston, 1990) in nature. This paper will primarily focus on parent education programs aimed at the development of parenting skills on a group basis. Parenting skills referred to in this article, are skills which can be employed by caregivers in relating more effectively to their children, so as to meet their own needs as well as those of their children. Counselors are involved in parent training as part of a school system (Ritchie & Partin, 1994) and through private practice.

Parent training programs

Some examples of parent programs follow that can serve as resources for professionals considering conducting or recommending parent training courses for clients. The programs examined in this article are examples of the range available. They may be useful when planning materials for an individual or particular group.

(1) Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) is a group program created by Gordon (1970). It aims to teach effective communication of feelings by teaching parents the skills of active listening and 'I-Messages', which are statements of one's initial feeling. It also teaches the co-operative resolution of parent-child conflicts by using what it terms the 'no-lose' method (Sutton, 1977). PET is a humanistic approach influenced by Rogers and Dewey. It emphasizes the equalization of power and places responsibility on the

individual parent or child (Brown, 1976; Davies, 1978).

(2) Parent Involvement Program (PIP), is an adaptation of Glasser's Reality Therapy. This program combines elements of both the humanist and cognitive approaches. It places particular emphasis on the cognitive appraisal of ones own behavior and on the acceptance of personal responsibility for ones behavior. It attempts to teach parents to become involved with their children and to maintain a healthy relationship. The thesis of PIP is that if previously misbehaving children can be convinced that someone else, especially their parent cares about and believes in them , then it is easier for the children to improve behavior, with a subsequent improvement in self esteem.

(3) Responsive Parent Training (RPT), is a program designed by Hall and Clark. It is based on the principles of behavior modification and seeks to teach parents to apply these principles to their child-rearing activities. The main emphasis is placed on helping parents to control the consequences present in the environment so as to maximize desirable behaviors and to minimize undesirable ones (Brown, 1976).

(4) Children: the Challenge Study Groups. This program is a translation of Adler's ideas by Dreikurs into practical, parent-child terms. It is designed for use with groups of parents in the school setting. Adler viewed humans as masters of their own fate and thus conceptualized a conscious person aware of goals and directions, capable of changing and of actualization (Fears, 1976). Central topics in this program include:

- understanding behavior as being based on one's perceptions of life, as being goal directed, and in particular, directed to fulfilling the need to belong,

- understanding the impact of birth order as an influence on the psychological position taken by each child,
- identifying the mistaken approach to child rearing as being either authoritarian or permissive,
- awareness of discouragement of the child as a source of their misbehavior,
- awareness of encouragement as a central factor in enhancing the parent-child relationship and the child's self concept,
- the use of natural and logical consequences as an effective alternative to punishment,
- identifying which of the four goals of misbehavior from which their child is operating, and
- the value of the Family Meeting run on democratic principles (Brown, 1976; Fears, 1976).

(5) Systematic Training For Effective Parenting (STEP). This is a packaged multi-media program developed by Dinkmeyer and McKay (1977). It combines the ideas of the previously mentioned Dreikurs model with the communication skills of PET (Davies, 1978: McKay & Hillman 1979).

(6) Between Parent and Child and Between Parent and Teenager, are books written by Ginott which deal with family communication skills. Ginott requires parents to develop the new code of communication in which the self-respect of the communicating parties is preserved, and active listening precedes interpretation; and statements of understanding precede statements of advice and instruction. This program views the parents as being in the position of power and control, but this should begin to equalize as the child becomes older (Davies, 1978).

(7) Peoplemaking is a book on conjoint family therapy written by Satir. Four Key factors in this book are the individual's feeling of self-worth, the communication used, the rules which develop in the family system, and the link with society. Parents, while remaining in control of the family, provide a suitable model for their children by acting as leaders and guides, rather than as bosses or pals.

(8) Parenting Skills Workshop is a packaged program designed by Abidin. The program is based on a selective combination of ideas from Dreikurs, Ginott, Gordon, and other researchers. It presents a series of optional units covering such topics as:

- the acceptance of the child and development of self-worth,
- developing the parent-child relationship through communication skills,
- the principles and application of behavior modification,
- management of feelings in parent-child interaction, and
- the child's educational progress.

This program provides a smorgasbord of skills from which the parents may choose, to apply in their particular situation (Davies, 1978).

(9) Parenting Skills Program created by Paull (1986) is a binder of numerous information sheets that cover many areas which can be used in a workshop format. The topics of the information notes include:

- causes of behavior,
- limit setting,
- communication,
- school and learning,
- rewards, punishments and pocket money,

- sex education, and
- adolescence.

This workshop folder enables the facilitator to determine which units to offer to the particular group. There are also various suggestions as to how offer and manage parent courses.

(10) Stop and Think Parenting is a how-to-do-it book written by Petersen (1992). It invites parents to learn skills for handling children, and skills to teach children about interacting with others. These skills include what tc say and do when faced with a child's misbehavior; how to talk and relate better to avoid problems, and how to encourage children's friendships. It is suggested that all these skills can be learned with patience and practice.

(11) Parenting Today is a program devised by Drent (1990). It consists of seven sessions which aim to empower parents to:

- communicate effectively with their children,
- establish effective rules within the family,
- use basic principles and procedures for the successful use of behavioral psychology, and
- build an effective partnership with the school in the area of discipline.

This program aims to challenge and empower parents in some of the most fundamental issues.

(12) Management of Young Children Program (MYCP) is a comprehensive practical skill-based program developed by Johnson (1990). It addresses the specific needs of parents with young children who exhibit defiant behaviors. The program is based on the belief that misbehaviour is maintained by parental reinforcement. For change to occur, parents must

alter their interactions with their children. It has its basis in social learning theory and behavior modification.

Evaluating parent training programs

Most training programs are carried out in a group environment. For many participating parents, the experience of belonging and of discovering that they are not alone in experiencing problems with their children, is of more importance than the specific skills they are learning.

Some parent programs are open to commercialism and exploitation for profit. Parents see a need for education in this area and might grasp at whatever is offered. This is compounded further by the fact that it is quite possible for untrained or inadequately trained instructors to conduct such training programs with less than satisfactory results.

Certain programs tend to be too simplistic in content because of the limited number of scheduled sessions. As a result, they run the risk that the participating parents may learn skills piecemeal. If this occurs, the techniques run the risk of being incorrectly applied. Incorrectly applied techniques are often ineffective. Parents may give up altogether and feel hopeless about the possibility of effecting any positive changes at all. They may also carry with them resentment about the mental health profession as they attribute blame to the facilitator.

Davies (1978) notes that there is little overt agreement among program developers on skills to be emphasized, on the mechanism of children's learning, and on the issue of parental power. With respect to the matter of power, PET and STEP are overtly against the power and argue for its equalization. Yet the expression of accepting and non-accepting feelings, the sending of 'I-Messages' can be considered as subtle forms of positive

reinforcement. Brown (1976) sees the Adlerian and STEP parents as exercising their control and power in using logical and natural consequences. Under this scheme, the conflict can be viewed as always ending because the parents always win. They do so because they hold all the cards. An Adlerian counselor would explain that democracy does not mean equality of power, but rather equality of value and respect.

It does not appear possible to eliminate power and positive and negative reinforcement from the parent-child relationship. There are different types of control within families; person-oriented with an elaborate code of communication and interaction, and positional-oriented with a restricted code of interaction. Programs matching the latter include the behaviour modification approach of RPT and MYCP. Counselors selecting participants for programs need to be aware of the types of family organisations of the parents, so that a sensitive matching of appropriate training program to parents can be accomplished.

Davies (1978) attempted to evaluate parent programs in the light of current child development theory and knowledge. Piaget, De Vries and Kamii view the problem of moral development "as one of taking the child out of his egocentricity and leading him to reciprocal relations of co-operation with others" (Davies, 1978, p. 194). This is best done when the child is encouraged to co-operate rather than be coerced. They suggest that coercion leaves no room for the child's choice and thus prevents the development of autonomy as there is no motivation for the child to try to understand the adult's point of view. Thus from this perspective, programs aiming to equalize the power of the parent and child could assist in this development towards autonomous, responsible behaviour. A spin-off of this approach is

that the child is encouraged to de-center and to co-ordinate the other person's logic with their own. That is, the development of cognitive operations may be enhanced.

Further applications of Piaget's view can be made. The child in its first three+ years of life is egocentric and incapable of taking another person's point of view. This makes it unlikely that the humanistic approaches such as PET with their verbal resolution of conflicts would be appropriate. Davies (1978) suggests that a program such as Ginott's is more in line with child development as it accepts more parental control in the very early years with a gradual equalization of power as the child gets older.

Even though rigorous research into the effects of parent education has not been extensive, a number of points have been highlighted in the research. Positive aspects include parents reporting that after a parent course they felt a lot better about themselves than they did before (Barletta, 1993; Brown, 1976). They reported an increased confidence in their ability to deal more effectively with their children (Huber & Lynch, 1978). Other reported benefits were that desirable behavior changes were reported in the children's behaviour, children's anxieties decreased, more positive relationships developed, and parent's attitudes and behaviours towards their children became more positive and relaxed (Armour, Rob & Lawson, 1979; Clifford, 1987).

The negative side of parent training includes criticism that most of the programs are geared to middle and upper class Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-American cultures. They do not necessarily focus on the unique socialization practices of the families of a particular culture (Arciniega et al, 1978; Armour, Rob & Lawson, 1979). The typical composition of the parent classes is 80 to

90% female (Brown, 1976). Participants in parent programs perceived some changes in their children's behavior, however they also reported an increase in disagreement with their spouses with respect to child-rearing practices (Fears, 1976). Most research in parent education has an over reliance on the use of self-report by parents. This data lacks empirical rigour and may be open to academic debate.

One study in which the researchers attempted to increase the rigour of their methodology, compared the effectiveness of Adlerian and behavioral approaches to parent education (Frazier & Matthes, 1975). They combined parents' self-reports, pre- and post-test administrations of parental attitude scales, and a behavior checklist in which parents were asked to report the child's behaviour during a specific 24 hour period. The results are summarised below.

Parents familiarised with the Adlerian mode were less restrictive in their attitudes towards children's freedom than were the parents in the other groups. The parents in the behavioral parent education program were less restrictive than those in the control group.

The Adlerian group participants were more inclined to use logical consequences and discipline appropriate to the children's misbehavior than were those in the control group. The behavioral group participants were more likely to be inconsistent with their children and played and talked less frequently with their children, as the parents in the Adlerian and control groups.

No significant longitudinal studies have been conducted to examine the link between parent skill development and behavioral change in children. Most evaluations of parent courses are made immediately at the

end of the program (Drent, 1990; Paull, 1986). These evaluations are merely an attempt to gain feedback about participant reactions to the program presentation, rather than assess the extent to which the program has increased care-giver skills. The reality is that skill development and confidence may increase over time.

A related area requiring further research to linkage with parent education programs, are the stages of child development and how it can helpful to parents (Davies, 1976; Sutton, 1977). The programs at present appear to not take sufficiently into account, the normal process of child development.

Implications for parent training

There are five basic findings that stand out in the examination of the literature and the programs reviewed.

(1) Parenting has become more difficult in recent years for a multiplicity of reasons,

(2) Parent programs cover a diversity of parenting issues,

(3) Parent education courses do effect positive changes to parenting skills of caregivers,

(4) Parent training can take various forms, and

(5) Parent courses can be a means of caregivers gaining more control in their lives.

Demonstrations, presentations, group discussions, experiential learning, homework tasks and behavioral role-play should typify parent training sessions. This ensures greater learning, and more enjoyment for participants. Both of these aspects are important in any workshop activity, irrespective of the content.

It must be noted that the participants in most parent programs are volunteers. Those who choose to attend courses in general and parent programs specifically, are usually quite verbal, social and usually highly educated. The counselor is often preaching to the converted. Parent programs reach an already reasonably competent audience, with well established support networks.

The challenge for counselors is to offer programs in geographic and social regions with greatest need, and structure the courses for maximum appeal and convenience to care-givers. Professionals need to address ways of procuring, linking, coordinating and monitoring support services for families at risk. The establishment of a network system following courses would ensure support for those with ongoing needs. Cooperation from education systems, mental health agencies and welfare organisations would facilitate the process of offering courses and providing the needed ongoing support.

No specific reference has been made to atypical or minority families, as it was out of the scope of this article. Such families would include: parents of special needs children, parents of pre-school children, parents of adolescent children, adoptive families, foster families, teenage parents, ethnic parents, homosexual parents, and special needs parents. Although few formal programs exist for these populations, there has been increased attention to the special needs of step-families and single-parent families. Neither of these latter family structures are atypical any longer.

Much of the literature, program components, and implications outlined in this article have relevance to these diverse families, yet there exist a host of other needs specific to each group mentioned. To examine the particular concerns of these groups is outside of the range of this article,

except to highlight the need for any facilitator of a parent program to ensure that the needs of the participating parents are addressed (Demdo, Sweitzer, & Lauritizen, 1985).

Counselors offering parent training need to be familiar with the various programs available, knowledgeable of child development, cognizant of family organisations, and referral sources. This ensures that families can be matched with the most appropriate program. The facilitator needs to be selective and flexible by nature, and eclectic in approach to be able to combine into a meaningful whole, the best of what is available. It is imperative that the facilitator be able to work effectively and comfortably from any program's approach, as well as possess a high level of interpersonal skill. The multimedia approach to training, for example STEP, is important. Parents of all educational levels can use this types of programs to access quality information.

Any parent program offered should allow parents sufficient time to consolidate learnings and raise specific concerns perceived. The provision for short and long term follow-up should always be available. Home-based intervention and support, although time-consuming, may be an ideal means of supplementing training programs.

Increasing complexities of society places greater strains on the family unit. Parent education can help by enabling caregivers to more adequately cope with the challenges they encounter. Reaching those with greatest need for parent education is the challenge for the counseling profession in the 90's. We should not feel discouraged in this time of need, rather we must have courage, use creativity and effect some worthwhile change for society. Counselors can share the challenge.

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